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A NOTE ON PEN-LAPSES, INITIATED VISUALLY

By JUNE E. DOWNEY

The recent analysis by Dr. Roback¹ of a number of pen lapses, and, in particular, his observations relative to the possibility of a pen lapse being set off by the visual perception of a word already written leads me to record a number of self-observations made on pen-lapses occurring spontaneously during rapid composition.

My records were made immediately on recognition of the lapse. It was usually possible to call back the graphic cue and in other respects to snapshot the process.

As a preliminary to the report I may say that in composition my cue is very distinctly acoustic-vocal-motor. There are present, in addition, hand-motor sensations, since the writing movements involve considerable tension; and, also, a high degree of visual consciousness of what the written product looks like. Only under very great absorption in the content do I lose this consciousness of visual supervision. One consequence of this is that pen lapses rarely get past the visual censor; incipient lapses are apt to be detected in the making. Another consequence is, I suspect, the initiation of an occasional lapse through visual suggestion. I select the following cases for report, quoting directly with a few additions in parentheses, from notes made at the time the lapse occurred.

1. "Started to write 'coats' for 'goats.' After writing 'co,' I stopped and wondered what was wrong. The acoustic-motor cue was unambiguously 'goats,' but, visually, the 'co,' with a vague visual continuation of 'ats' seemed just as meaningful. There was considerable hesitation before correction was made....Definite split between the auditory-vocal-motor cue and the visual report on the process. Was the origin of the lapse grapho-motor in nature? (A more probable cause would seem to be the similarity in sound between the 'c' and the 'g.').....Noticed later that the word 'color' occurred in the line above, three inches to the left. Perhaps the sight of this 'c' suggested the lapse. 'Color-blindness' was the topic of the paragraph, so that 'C' may well have persisted in consciousness."

2. "Wrote 'world(s)' for 'words.' This lapse was corrected before 's' was completed; 's' was on the tip of the pen when writing was halted and the correction made..... This lapse is interesting in that it parallels another lapse recorded the same day, ('coats' for 'goats'). The word 'world' occurred in the preceding line, two inches to the left of the place where the lapse occurred."

3. "The auditory-vocal-motor cue was, clearly, 'give' but I wrote 'keep,' recognizing the lapse as soon as the word was written. Was unable to see any reason for such a lapse, then, recalling my observation of a month before, looked up and to the left—sure enough! there was the word 'Keeps' first word in second line above, one and five-eighths of an inch to the left."

¹ This JOURNAL, 1919, 30, pp. 274-290.

4. "Was taking notes on book I was reading. Wrote 'See Galton, p. 20g,' for 'See Galton, p. 209.' (Both G's were written in capital form but with a long down loop.) Distance from the 'G' in Galton to the interpolated 'G' was one and three-fourths inch. The graphic cue was largely visual, the number 209 as visualized on the page; no lip-motor consciousness. Possibly the lapse was due to grapho-motor perseveration, long down stroke on the 'g' (initial stroke on '9' and on 'g' being similar); possibly there was a visual suggestion operating from the peripherally seen G."

5. "Wrote on the margin of a theme I was correcting, 'Collected' for 'Connected.' Sentence read, 'Should be parallel in form and connected.' It was about two inches from the first 'l' in 'parallel' to 'l' as written in 'collected.'"

6. "Was intending to write 'On the other hand,' I wrote, instead, 'On the who(1e).' The auditory cue was 'hand' but perhaps the word 'whole' was there in the margin. Lapse was immediately recognized visually. After writing an account of the lapse I examined the writing tablet to see if a 'w' had occurred in the preceding line. The word 'what' was found in the line above, about one-half an inch to the right of where the lapse occurred."

7. "Wrote in a letter 'I've been hoping to see your article in print ere this. Of course it's hop(ing).' The verbal cue was definitely 'Of course it's worthwhile.' The lapse was recognized visually at once. It would seem induced by visual suggestion. In the manuscript the first 'hoping' is about two inches to the left and a half inch above the second 'hoping'."

Other sorts of lapses were of course recorded. Perhaps most interesting of all are those which result in a hybrid word, due to coalescence, of the intended and of the automatic word. Sometimes introspection reveals an inchoate or confused meaning-consciousness, which is highly instructive. One or two examples may be given.

8. "Wrote 'Emotent,' for 'Emotion constitutes the content.' This lapse was recognized as soon as written. (No analysis)."

9. "Wrote, 'Going to the door I saw Dig outstretched on the back porch.' There was a conflict in writing-cue between 'Nig' (name of our cat) and 'Dick' (name of our dog); 'Dick' prevailed as cue. It was not until rereading my notes next day that I perceived the coalescence of the two cues. This lapse escaped the visual censor."

10. "In correcting a student's theme I started to write 'please' for 'believe.' Recognized this error when I started on the below-line stroke of 'p' (a visual and motor recognition). Auditory-vocal-motor cue was a blurred 'b-l-l.' I had just been thinking out instructions to class. I intended to say, 'Please save this theme.' There was a perseveration of meaning which was influential, together with the similarity in sound between 'b' and 'p,' in causing the lapse."

None of these lapses, except possibly 3 and 7 lend themselves to a Freudian interpretation. That Freudian lapses, motivated by unconscious complexes do occur I am convinced. I have, for example, written 'toxin' when I meant 'tocsin' and the like, but such lapses seem the exception, not the rule.